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Modern Training in Corrections

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Let's face it — training for correctional employees is a relatively new concept. In fact, it has come into being within the span of my career. As recently as the early 1970s, a new correctional officer in my home state of Arkansas was shown the ropes by an inmate. The officer would report for duty in a fresh, new uniform and an inmate would explain what to do and how and when to do it. If either of them happened to be armed, the inmate was far more likely to be the one carrying the weapon, because until the mid-1970's, a lot of inmates were armed. Officers cost the state money, but "security" provided by inmates did not. The majority of inmate supervision was done by other inmates who were allowed to carry weapons because they had been placed in positions of trust.

Corrections was a different world back then. A shift consisted of a handful of officers supervising more than 1,000 inmates. The officers didn't have hand-held radios or pepper spray. They couldn't call master control for help or use electronic doors and gates to shut down and separate. The institution functioned without security cameras and metal detectors. The unit's perimeter system consisted of one warm body, two eyes and the three gears of some worn out vehicle that ringed the fence line over and

over again. Nothing that came through the gate passed through a heartbeat detector or an X-ray machine.

There were no plans for handling emergencies, except for standing orders "to take care of it" and "do what you have to do." If something did erupt, staff did not have sublethal munitions or gas. They didn't even have riot gear. No one had ever heard of using communication to de-escalate. They didn't know about crisis intervention, Verbal Judo or emergency response.

Now, when correctional facilities are filled with space-age technology and highly-trained employees, it is staggering to realize how far the profession has come in such a short time. No longer is training a concept or a luxury, it is an absolute must. Effective training, or the lack of it, will make or break a correctional agency.

For the Arkansas Department of Correction (ADC), whose facilities are fully accredited by the American Correctional Association, initial and continuing training are mandatory for all staff. For at least 10 years, to attract and retain quality staff, ADC has placed great emphasis on training that improves aptitude, leadership and supervision skills. Tying merit incentive pay to training requirements in addition to job performance was a bold step, but supported our objective of maintaining a highly trained, motivated workforce.

In 2010, ADC's training academy logged more than 200,000 training hours. The academy has two sides — one focused on in-service training, and the other on basic training for correctional officers. The agency's 4,000 employees participated in 47,204 hours of in-service training, while cadets engaged in 170,680 hours during seven-week intervals.

The trick today isn't developing training; it's paying for it. With the economy stumbling and budgets tightening, training has to take its share of the cuts. For Arkansas, the goal of having an exceptional workforce also began taking a toll on our overtime budget, leaving us with the challenge of providing quality training while keeping expenses in check. The department cast a critical eye on training overall. We began focusing on ways to decrease overtime pay and increase the quality of essential training.

When 2011 neared its close, we were seeing results. A training committee, comprised of a broad representation of agency personnel, reviewed training. One of the first conclusions was to make even better use of video conferencing, e-learning and distance education. ADC had been using them for years, often topping the list of state users at the National Institute of Corrections. The push to expand online training resources

began in January with the roll out of ADC's Internet-based learning center, or eCADEMY, which offers more than 350 online classes — at least 200 of which already meet the requirements of ACA standards. In fact, through ACA's Corrections Online Training Collaborative (COTC), Arkansas worked with ACA, and its partner, Essential Learning, to tailor a training plan to meet the state's needs. Because COTC provides a top-notch, cost-effective solution to online training, its expertise and resources can vastly expand the training option available to employees.

In Arkansas, ADC had 1,335 active eCADEMY users in November, up 14 percent from the previous month, which is typical of the monthly increases we have seen. Unit trainers also formed a committee to establish guidelines and curriculum to help employees use the eCADEMY to earn training hours that will further satisfy Meritorious Incentive Pay System requirements, as well as meet the requirements of ACA standards. As a result, a 40-hour security for nonsecurity class was developed that allows new employees to complete their first 24 hours at their work station through the eCADEMY followed by 16 hours (two days) at the Training Academy.

Another significant savings in manpower time came with requiring employees to enroll in one of four management-level classes after promotion rather than before. The change still makes the class mandatory, but only after selection. This has significantly reduced the demand for training hours. ADC continues to require employees to complete training to qualify for bonus payments that may be available through the state's merit incentive program. But now, those hours are tied only to the standards of ACA — a goal we remain convinced is worth meeting. ♦